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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000422

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AMEMBASSY MINSK SENDS  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/30/2033

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR BO

SUBJECT: BELARUS: CHARGE'S MEETING WITH LUKASHENKO'S SON

REF: MOORE-MERKEL TELCON 05/21/08

Classified By: Jonathan Moore, Charge, Embassy Minsk, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (S/NF) Charge met May 21 with Viktor Lukashenko, President Aleksandr Lukashenko's oldest son and national security advisor. The meeting was a simple exchange of views; Viktor did not offer any concessions or speak of prospects that the current situation -- either the violations of Belarusians' human rights or the harassment of the U.S. Embassy -- would change. However, he acknowledged Charge's point that the GOB's January promise of releasing all political prisoners had not been filled, and showed understanding (in that context) for the sanctions step taken by the U.S. Treasury Department in March. Viktor pledged to be available to Charge again as needed. End summary.

¶2. (S/NF) Charge was informed on the morning of May 21 that Viktor Aleksandrovich Lukashenko was prepared to meet with him. The 40-minute, one-on-one meeting occurred in Viktor's private office in the Presidential Administration building. He greeted Charge cordially, and deferred to Charge to begin the conversation. Charge outlined the turn of events earlier this year, beginning with the regime's pledge to release all political prisoners by the end of February, and reminded Viktor that the USG had been prepared to take positive steps with regard to travel restrictions and other sanctions. However, the failure to release former presidential candidate and political prisoner Aleksandr Kozulin -- either before his wife's impending death in February or after -- had been very negatively received, and led to a clarification of existing sanctions followed March 6.

¶3. (S/NF) Charge added that Washington will continue to follow developments closely, looking particularly for the release of the three current political prisoners and further reforms in preparation for the parliamentary elections planned for September.

¶4. (S/NF) Viktor Lukashenko seemed pleased to be briefed and listened carefully to Charge's points. In contrast to other GOB officials of our acquaintance, he acknowledged that the reversal of the GOB's January pledge to release all political prisoners could have been perceived negatively in Washington, and said that he could understand how that perception led to the decision to issue a broader clarification of economic sanctions against Belarusian energy conglomerate "Belneftekhim" March 6. On other issues, Viktor dismissed political prisoners Andrey Kim and Sergey Parsyukhevich as "bandits" -- Charge noted the absence of evidence against them -- and trotted out a standard complaint that USG pressure was "forcing" Belarus to move closer to Russia. Charge rejoined that the U.S. did not fear relations between Russia and a sovereign, independent, and democratic Belarus,

a point that Viktor acknowledged with a smile. At the meeting's close, Viktor thanked Charge for the discussion, and offered to meet in the future.

Biographic/Atmospheric Note

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15. (SBU) According to open-source information in Belarus, Viktor Lukashenko was born in 1976. After studying international relations at Belarus State University in Minsk, he served in the border troops as a lieutenant, and was later a third secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before becoming head of the foreign economic department of the military-industrial firm "Agat." He has been his father's national security advisor since 2005, was made a member of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus in 2007, and more recently has been given the title of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. Viktor is married -- reportedly to his "high school sweetheart" -- and has one daughter.

16. (S/NF) Viktor's office was rather small, located at the end of a prominent hallway. Belarusian KGB guards at the building's main entrance and some thuggish-looking male visitors in Viktor's outer office were surprised to see Charge appear, but both Viktor and his assistant were uniformly polite. He carefully referred to his father only as "President" and beamed when addressed as "respected (uvazhayemyy) Viktor Aleksandrovich."

Comment

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VILNIUS 00000422 002 OF 002

17. (S/NF) While the subsequent behavior -- including the May 29 arrest of Democracy Commission grantees and the interrogation of our local staff, and the May 30 denial of political prisoner Sergey Parsyukhevich's appeal -- indicates that the regime's core policy has not changed, it is still somewhat encouraging that Lukashenko's son was willing to meet with the U.S. Embassy in Minsk and is willing to do so again. When we have a new message to deliver, we can now do so with one of the only people who has the possibility of influencing Aleksandr Lukashenko.

CLOUD